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Article

Social Media Use, Political trust and Political Participation Among Urban Indian Youth: Evidence from Bengaluru

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Abstract: Political engagement in its digital form has pushed social media to the centre of civic discourse. However, the link between online social media activity and its manifestation to offline political participation has not been properly studied, especially in non-western democracies. This study investigates three dimensions of engagement on social media, political discussion, political news sharing and political news consumption affect online and offline political participation of Indian youth using trust as a mediator and gender, age and education as moderators. Using a sample size of 425 respondents in the age group of 18-30, the study uses exploratory factor analysis (EFA), confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and structural equation modelling (SEM) with bootstrapping. Results indicate that all these three dimensions significantly and positively predict trust in political institutions, which in turn strongly predicts offline (β=0.548) and online (β=0.440) political participation. Political trust consistently mediates this relationship. Moderation analysis shows that gender amplifies the effect of news consumption and sharing on trust. Age strengthens the effects of political discussion and news consumption. Education plays the role of a moderator only the news consumption-trust relationship. The model explains a variance of 36.6% in offline participation and 22.6% in online participation. These findings show that political trust is a crucial bridge between digital engagement and civic action. This underlines its importance for democratic participation in the democracy of emerging economies. These findings are specifically true for urban cities in India with a high English-speaking population. This cannot be generalized for rural India or youth that speak regional languages.

Keywords: Social Media, Political participation, Political Trust, Indian Youth, Structural Equation Modelling, digital democracy.

1. Introduction

The advent and rise of social media has fundamentally changed and reshaped political participation in democracies. Platforms such as X (Twitter), Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram and WhatsApp have evolved how citizens access political information. These platform have also transformed how citizens access, share and act on political information and content (Effing et al., 2021). Among youth, who are the most active users of these social media platforms, it has become the portal to political life. Social media has replaced newspapers and televisions as a medium of choice for political news and information (Cadayday et al., 2024).

Yet the nexus between social media and political participation is not straight forward.

Research documents both mobilising and demobilising effects depending on the platform features, user motivations and context (Kligler-Vilenchik, N et al 2021, Boxell et al., 2021). One critical unexplored component is this relationship is political trust – citizens confidence in political institutions and actors. While declining political trust is observed across many democracies (Beattie, 2021), social media's role in either eroding or building trust is contested (Lissitsa, 2021, Farhall et al. 2020).

India is a good example to understand these dynamics. As the world's largest democracy, India has over 60 crore active internet users with one of world's youngest population with 65% of the population under 35 years of age. The National Youth Policy (2014) defines youth of that age between 15 and 29. This study aligns itself to this definition with a slight increase in the band to consider citizens of voting age. This study pegs youth as between 18-30 years of age. Despite India's demographic significance, research on social media and its political effects among Indian youth is limited compared to western democracies.

Bengaluru, the city selected for this study is referred to the "IT Capital" of India and also the Silicon Valley of India. Bengaluru is a highly educated city with a multilingual population where 100 languages and dialects of India are spoken. This linguistic and cultural diversity and the pluralistic nature of the Indian democracy makes Bengaluru an ideal setting to understand youth engagement.

This study addresses four research questions

a. Do social political media discussion, news sharing and news consumption affect trust in political institutions?

b. Does political trust affect online and offline political participation?

c. Do gender, age and education moderate these relationships?

d. Does political trust media the social media – participation relationship?

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews the relevant literature; Section 3 describes the methods; Section 4 presents the results; Section 5 discusses theoretical and practical implications; and Section 6 concludes.

2. Literature Review

2.1 *Social Media and Political participation*

Social media platform has evolved from social networking activities to mainline forums for political discussion, discourse and action (Effing et al., 2021). Unlike traditional media where the communication was one to one to being many to many where users can consume, distribute and distribute political content Studies show a strong link between social media use and political participation. However, there is a debate on whether social media use directly causes political participation (Boxell et al., 2021, Pan et al., 2026). A meta-analysis with data from multiple countries shows that the co-relation is positive but modest. However, claiming a cause effect relationship is premature since most studies use cross sectional data and may be influenced by self-selection bias.

In this case, a useful theoretical framework could be the differential gains model (Martin, 2021). According to this model, active online political expression through commenting, sharing and discussion empowers the digital news consumption and participation more than passive news consumption. Zúñiga et al. (2021) sought to expand on this by looking at political consumerism. They found that social media users are likely to make purchase decisions based on political considerations or compunctions suggesting that political behaviour intersect economic behaviour.

2.2 *Three Dimensions of Social Media Political Engagement.*

Contemporary research brings out three conceptually distinct dimensions of social media and political engagement, news consumption, sharing and discussion. Political news consumption has become the dominant mode of information access for younger cohorts. Newman et al., (2024) found that across 47 countries, online and social media constitute the primary source of news for a majority of those under the age of 35 with old media receding substantially among younger demographics.

Kümpel et al. (2023) found that news consumption through social media exerts clear mobilising effects on participation, and these effects differ across social media platforms. Facebook facilitates in events-based mobilisation, X (Twitter) drives information diffusion rapid hashtag dissemination whereas Instagram and Snapchat are effective for visual or emotional political appeals.

Political sharing turns ordinary users into people who select and spread political information. This also accelerates the spread of disinformation. Pennycook and Rand (2021), in a large-scale experimental study social media users often shared content that they are politically aligned to without giving it a fact check. This is not done intentionally through any motivated behaviour but through a casual swipe off their devices. The "news-finds-me" perception, the belief that important information will reach the users without seeking has been demonstrated by Gil

de Zúñiga et al. (2022). This can reduce people's willingness to seek information and make them more likely to believe low-quality content, especially younger users.

Political discussion over social media encourages civic dialogue but also create "echo chambers". Cinelli et al. (2021), using data from millions of social media posts across the world found that people engaged with likeminded people creating an online polarised online environment. They also found that blocking people who did not adhere to their views encouraged these divisions.

At the same time, Guess et al. (2023) found that people still gets political news contrasting their views challenging the notion that information environments are fully closed. Settle (2022) further showed that sociopolitical identity and moral emotion determine decisions to accept, reject or amplify social media political content. This contributes to an increasing the online homogeneous networks.

2.3 *Political Trust: Concept and Consequences*

Political trust represents the faith that citizens have in the political system where they believe political institutions and actors will make decisions that decisions that benefit them (Beattie, 2021). It talks about the confidence that people have in their parliament, judiciary, the executive and in their elected officials. High political trust is generally associated with greater political stability, improved performance by the government and greater citizen compliance with laws and practices (Peterson et al., 2021). Conversely declining trust leads to cynicism, political apathy and conditions that allow misinformation and populist movements to thrive.

Political trust is dynamic. It fluctuates with government performance, economic conditions, social inequities, historical legacies and media representations (Harris & Kim, 2021). The rise of social media has transformed these dynamics. Some researchers argue that social media promotes transparency and trust in institutions; others warn that social media creates "echo chambers" leading to misinformation and ultimately erodes trust in political institutions and actors (Warren et al., 2021; Cerón, 2021). Hooghe and Mariën (2021) say that social media and trust leads to participations in complex ways. In the case of conventional political participation like voting, higher trust means higher engagement; for unconventional participation like protests distrust can itself be a great motivator.

2.4 *Social Media and Youth Political Engagement in India*

According to Iyengar et al. (2021), partisan news exposure often occurs online during interaction with peers. Social media platform help youth in disseminating political information and knowledge thus accessing electoral and civic opportunities (Ibardeloza et al., 2022). In Philippines, Arugay and Baquisal (2022) and Cadayday et al. (2024) found that Gen Z youth shape their political discourse through social media significantly. Similarly in India, social media has become key in ensuring youth mobilisation, particularly among Urban youth and first-time voters (Verma, R. 2024).

India's social media adoption has largely been driven by the availability of low cost smart phones and one of the lowest data charges in the world. WhatsApp is widely used for political consumption, sharing and discussion in rural India owing to the low bandwidth needs of the platform and also owing to the group messaging features (Khan and Khan, 2025). The election commission of India reports that youth voter turnout has been increasing evidenced by the recent elections but not as much of older voters. Youth in India face challenges of high unemployment, disparities in access to education and caste based discrimination which shape their political enragement and trust in institutions (Singh, 2025).

2.5 *Conceptual Model and Hypothesis*

Based on theoretical literature, the study proposes a conceptual model in which the three dimensions of social media engagement directly influences online and offline political participation in two pathways, a direct route and one mediated by trust in political institutions. Demographic variables like age, education and sex moderate the relationship between social media engagement variables and political trust.

The sample of the study is described in Table 1

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Sample (N = 425)

Demographic Category	**n**	**%**
Gender		

Male	218	51.3
Female	207	48.7
Age Group		
18–20 years	98	23.1
21–25 years	187	44.0
26–30 years	140	32.9
Education		
High School	64	15.1
Diploma	51	12.0
Graduate	212	49.9
Postgraduate	98	23.1

The hypotheses are grouped into four categories. First, H1–H3 propose that political discussion, political sharing, and political news consumption on social media each increase trust in political institutions. Second, H4 and H5 propose that higher political trust leads to greater offline and online political participation. Third, H6a–H8b propose that these three forms of social media engagement directly increase both offline and online participation. Fourth, H9–H14 propose that political trust mediates the relationship between social media engagement and participation, while H15–H23 propose that gender, age, and education influence the strength of the relationship between social media engagement and political trust.

3. Methods

3.1 *Research Design*

This study used a cross sectional, quantitative survey design to understand the relationship between the variables used. The variables used in the study were social media political engagement (News consumption, sharing and discussion), political trust as a mediator and online and offline political participation. The moderators used to test relationship between social media engagement and political trust were the demographic variables like age, sex and education. The Hypothesis were tested using a quantitative approach. Cross sectional data was appropriate for this study, but limits causal conclusions.

3.2 *Sample and Sampling Procedure*

The sample size was 425 respondents who were people in the 18-30 age group and residents of Bengaluru. The sample size was calculated for 2.5 million youth at a 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error using Rao soft calculator yielding a sample adequate for structural equation modelling (recommended minimum 200-300 cases).

Multi stage quota sampling procedure was adopted. In the first stage, Bengaluru was divided into three Lok Sabha constituencies, Bengaluru North, South and Central from each of which one assembly constituency was randomly chosen, Jayanagar (South), Rajajinagar (Central) and Hebbal (North). Within each constituency, judgement sampling was employed to recruit the participants reflecting the area's demographic diversity in terms of age, gender and education.

3.3 *Measures*

All constructs were assessed using multi-item Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), which were adapted from validated instruments in prior research and modified for the Indian context. The survey was administered in English.

Social Media Political Discussion (SMUPLTDSC) was measured using 10 items assessing the frequency of political discussion on social media (eg: “I often discuss political issues with others on social media”).

Social Media Political Sharing (SMUPLTPRTC) was measured using 10 items that captured the political engagement practices of the respondents. This could be a like, sharing or retweeting political content. (eg:”I often share political news articles on social media”).

Social Media Political news Consumption (SMUPOLNEWS) was measured using 10 items measuring news consumption and consumption habits of the respondents. (eg:” I use social media to stay updated on political events”).

Trust in Political Institutions (TRSTPOLINST) was measured using five items to capture confidence in key Institutions (eg:”I trust the Indian parliament to make decisions that benefit the country”).

Offline Political Participation (OFFLINPOLPART) used 5 items to measure conventional participation (eg:I have voted in an election”)

Online Political Participation (ONLINPOLPART) used 5 items to measure digital engagement (eg: “I have signed an online petition”).

Table 2. Construct Reliability and Convergent Validity

Construct	α	ρc	AVE	Loading Range
SMUPLTDSC	0.912	0.926	0.557	0.713–0.774
SMUPLTPRTC	0.915	0.929	0.567	0.710–0.785
SMUPOLNEWS	0.910	0.925	0.553	0.726–0.770
TRSTPOLINST	0.858	0.898	0.638	0.781–0.817
OFFLINPOLPART	0.845	0.890	0.618	0.750–0.799
ONLINPOLPART	0.838	0.885	0.607	0.760–0.789

3.4 *Data Collection*

Data was collected over a three month period (Jan-Mar, 2024) by trained research assistants in each of the three assembly constituencies. Participants were approached in public areas like parks, cafes. Community centres and educational institutions. Respondents were asked about their age, current living address and active use of at least on social media platform regularly. Informed consent was obtained from all of them. Surveys were administered using google forms on a mobile phone or tablet, completion took 15 -20 minutes.

3.5 *Data Analysis Plan*

Data was analysed in four phases. The tools used were SPSS 27 and SmartPLS 4.0.

Phase 1: Measurement model validation via EFA (principal component analysis, Varimax rotation) followed by CFA assessing indicator reliability, internal consistency, convergent validity, and discriminant validity.

Phase 2: Bivariate Pearson correlation analysis.

Phase 3: structural equation modelling (SEM) with bootstrapping

Phase 4: mediation analysis for indirect effects through political trust, and moderation analysis using interaction terms to test demographic conditioning effects.

EFA and CFA were used on the same sample. Ideally a split sample approach would have been prudent with EFA conducted on one half and CFA on the other to reduce the risk of model overfitting and capitalisation on chance. Given the sample size constraint N = 425 – a minimum feasible for PLS-SEM with this complex model, a full split was not statistically doable. To partially overcome this limitation, the CFA was embedded within the PLS-SEM environment in SmartPLS 4.0 which applies a fundamentally different estimation algorithm (partial least squares) to that used in the EFA (principal components analysis in SPSS). The factor structure derived from the EFA thus served as the priori theoretical structure for the PLS-CFA rather than a data driven template fitted to the same cases in the

same estimation framework. This approach is consistent with the published guidelines for PLS-SEM studies for medium size samples (Hair et al., 2022). The authors acknowledge that an independent replication study with a new data set or a split sample would further strengthen confidence in the measurement.

4. Results

Prior to structural testing the measurement model was assessed through EFA. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure yielded 0.944, indicating excellent sampling adequacy. Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant (χ^2 = 9912.246, df = 990, $p < 0.001$), confirming that correlations were suitable for factor analysis.

Table 3. KMO and Bartlett's Test

Measure	Value
KMO Measure of Sampling Adequacy	0.944
Bartlett's Test – Chi-Square (approx.)	9912.246
Degrees of Freedom	990
Significance	< 0.001

A total of 58.68% of the variance was explained by the six variables that were recovered with eigenvalues greater than 1.00. 30.02% of the variation was explained by factor 1 (eigenvalue = 13.507); factors 2–6 contributed 8.53%, 7.28%, 5.64%, 4.02%, and 3.21%, respectively. Items loaded correctly on their intended construction, according to varimax rotation (all loadings > 0.60).

The six factors were

Social Media Political Sharing

Social Media Political Discussion

Social Media Political News Consumption

Online Political Participation

Trust in Political Institutions

Offline Political Participation

CFA was carried out using SmartPLS 4.0. Every item met the indication reliability criteria with standardised loadings over 0.70 (range: 0.710–0.817). Both Composite Reliability (ρc) and Cronbach's α values over the 0.70 criterion, ranging from 0.885 to 0.929 and 0.838 to 0.915, respectively. The range of Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values was 0.553 to 0.638, all of which were higher than the convergent validity requirement of 0.50. The lack of multicollinearity was confirmed by Variance Inflation Factors (VIF), which varied from 1.6 to 2.2.

Table 4. Factor Loadings, Reliability, and Convergent Validity

Construct	α	ρc	AVE	Loading Range
SMUPLTDSC	0.912	0.926	0.557	0.713–0.774
SMUPLTPRTC	0.915	0.929	0.567	0.710–0.785
SMUPOLNEWS	0.910	0.925	0.553	0.726–0.770
TRSTPOLINST	0.858	0.898	0.638	0.781–0.817
OFFLINPOLPART	0.845	0.890	0.618	0.750–0.799
ONLINPOLPART	0.838	0.885	0.607	0.760–0.789

Standard root mean square residual (SRMR) was used to evaluate model fit.

The SRMR for the saturated model and estimated model were 0.045 and 0.079 below the acceptable 0.08 level.

The normal fit index (NFI) was 0.860 for the Saturated model and 0.849 for the Estimated model. The model NFI falls below the 0.9 indicating that the model does not achieve an optimal fit..

Henseler et al. (2016), however, point out that in PLS-SEM, the SRMR is the main fit criteria and NFI is regarded as supplemental; if the SRMR values are within reasonable boundaries and the model complexity (Six Constructs, 45 indicators), the fit is considered adequate while acknowledging the constraint while interpreting results.

Table 5. Model Fit Summary

Index	Saturated Model	Estimated Model
SRMR	0.045	0.079
d_ULS	2.071	6.452
d_G	0.611	0.675
Chi-square	1442.318	1554.995
NFI	0.860	0.849

Table 6. Variance Explained (R^2 Values)

Dependent Variable	R^2
Trust in Political Institutions	0.315
Offline Political Participation	0.366
Online Political Participation	0.226

Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio was used to assess discriminant validity and the Fornell-Larcker criterion. All the HTMT values are below the 0.85 threshold. The values range from 0.348 to 0.643. The AVE square root for each construct exceeded its co-relation with all other constructs, confirming adequate discriminant validity.

Table 7. HTMT Ratios

Construct Pair	HTMT Ratio
SMUPLTDSC ↔ SMUPLTPRTC	0.368
SMUPLTDSC ↔ SMUPOLNEWS	0.449
SMUPLTDSC ↔ TRSTPOLINST	0.474
SMUPLTDSC ↔ OFFLINPOLPART	0.544
SMUPLTDSC ↔ ONLINPOLPART	0.447
SMUPLTPRTC ↔ SMUPOLNEWS	0.435
SMUPLTPRTC ↔ TRSTPOLINST	0.484
SMUPLTPRTC ↔ OFFLINPOLPART	0.519
SMUPLTPRTC ↔ ONLINPOLPART	0.348
SMUPOLNEWS ↔ TRSTPOLINST	0.483
SMUPOLNEWS ↔ OFFLINPOLPART	0.500
SMUPOLNEWS ↔ ONLINPOLPART	0.426

TRSTPOLINST ↔ OFFLINPOLPART	0.643
TRSTPOLINST ↔ ONLINPOLPART	0.519
OFFLINPOLPART ↔ ONLINPOLPART	0.436

Table 8. Fornell-Larcker Criterion

Construct	SMUPLTDSC	SMUPLTPRTC	SMUPOLNEWS	TRSTPOLINST	OFFLINPOLPART	ONLINPOLPART
SMUPLTDSC	0.746					
SMUPLTPRTC	0.339	0.753				
SMUPOLNEWS	0.412	0.400	0.743			
TRSTPOLINST	0.428	0.433	0.431	0.798		
OFFLINPOLPART	0.479	0.460	0.442	0.548	0.786	
ONLINPOLPART	0.395	0.306	0.373	0.440	0.436	0.779

4.2 Corelation analysis: As seen on table 9, Pearson corelation analysis showed that there was a positive corelation among all the variables studied (P<0.01). Political trust displayed the strongest corelation with offline political participation (r = 0.548). Online and offline political participation were moderately corelated (r = 0.436) indicating complimentary forms of engagement.

Table 9. Correlation Matrix Among Key Variables

Variable	SMUPLTDSC	SMUPLTPRTC	SMUPOLNEWS	TRSTPOLINST	OFFLINPOLPART	ONLINPOLPART
SMUPLTDSC	1.000					
SMUPLTPRTC	0.339	1.000				
SMUPOLNEWS	0.412	0.400	1.000			
TRSTPOLINST	0.428	0.433	0.431	1.000		
OFFLINPOLPART	0.479	0.460	0.442	0.548	1.000	
ONLINPOLPART	0.395	0.306	0.373	0.440	0.436	1.000

Note: All correlations significant at p < 0.01 (2-tailed). SMUPLTDSC = Social Media Political Discussion; SMUPLTPRTC = Social Media Political Sharing; SMUPOLNEWS = Social Media Political News Consumption;

TRSTPOLINST = Trust in Political Institutions; OFFLINPOLPART = Offline Political Participation; ONLINPOLPART = Online Political Participation.

4.3 Direct Effects

SEM analysis with bootstrapping (5000 sub samples) was used to test direct effects. It was found that all three forms of social media political engagement, political discussion, political sharing and political news consumption had a significant positive effect on trust supporting hypothesis from 1 to 3. This showed that people who engage more with political content on social media tend to have higher levels of political trust. Together, these factors explained 31.5% of the variation in political trust.

Table 10. Direct Effects on Trust in Political Institutions

Path	β	SD	t	p	f^2	R^2	Hypothesis
SMUPLTDSC → TRSTPOLINST	0.247	0.045	5.517	<0.001	0.071	0.315	H1 Supported
SMUPLTPRTC → TRSTPOLINST	0.259	0.048	5.421	<0.001	0.079		H2 Supported
SMUPOLNEWS → TRSTPOLINST	0.226	0.048	4.717	<0.001	0.056		H3 Supported

Effects of trust in political institutions :Trust in political institutions significantly increased with both online and offline political participation supporting hypothesis 4 and 5. The relation was stronger for offline than online participation. This suggests that individuals with higher level of trust in political institutions are more likely to be involved in political activities both in the traditional mode and the online mode.

Table 11. Effects of Trust on Political Participation

Path	β	SD	t	p	f^2	Hypothesis
TRSTPOLINST → OFFLINPOLPART	0.548	0.037	14.852	<0.001	0.429	H4 Supported
TRSTPOLINST → ONLINPOLPART	0.440	0.043	10.143	<0.001	0.241	H5 Supported

People who discussed, share and consumed political content on social media were more likely to participate in political activities both on the online mode and the traditional route. Political discussion had the strongest influence while political sharing had a smaller effect on online political participation. This model explained a substantiative part of political participation, especially traditional participation as seen in the table below.

Table 12. Direct Effects of Social Media Engagement on Political Participation

Path	β	SD	t	p	f^2	R^2	Hypothesis
SMUPLTDSC → OFFLINPOLPART	0.301	0.047	6.400	<0.001	0.113	0.366	H6a Supported
SMUPLTDSC → ONLINPOLPART	0.259	0.052	4.948	<0.001	0.069	0.226	H6b Supported

SMUPLTPRTC → OFFLINPOLPART	0.273	0.047	5.766	<0.001	0.095		H7a Supported
SMUPLTPRTC → ONLINPOLPART	0.133	0.050	2.663	0.008	0.018		H7b Supported
SMUPOLNEWS → OFFLINPOLPART	0.213	0.051	4.187	<0.001	0.054		H8a Supported
SMUPOLNEWS → ONLINPOLPART	0.219	0.050	4.390	<0.001	0.047		H8b Supported

4.4 Mediation Analysis

Bootstrapping (5000 sub samples) was used to the check if there was a mediating effect of trust in the political use of social media and political participation. The indirect effects were statistically significant ($p<0.01$). Effect sizes were not very strong but consistent across the three dimensions ranging from $\beta=0.100$ to $\beta= 0.142$ with political sharing producing the strongest mediating effects. The results support H9-H14 showing trust as a reliable pathway through which social media engagement translated to political participation.

Table 13. Indirect Effects – Mediation Analysis

Indirect Path	β	SD	t	p	Hypothesis
SMUPLTDSC → TRSTPOLINST → OFFLINPOLPART	0.135	0.028	4.911	<0.001	H9 Supported
SMUPLTDSC → TRSTPOLINST → ONLINPOLPART	0.109	0.023	4.651	<0.001	H10 Supported
SMUPLTPRTC → TRSTPOLINST → OFFLINPOLPART	0.142	0.029	4.832	<0.001	H11 Supported
SMUPLTPRTC → TRSTPOLINST → ONLINPOLPART	0.114	0.025	4.644	<0.001	H12 Supported
SMUPOLNEWS → TRSTPOLINST → OFFLINPOLPART	0.124	0.028	4.447	<0.001	H13 Supported
SMUPOLNEWS → TRSTPOLINST → ONLINPOLPART	0.100	0.024	4.166	<0.001	H14 Supported

4.5 Moderation Analysis

Gender influenced some of the relationships in the conceptual model. While the effect of political discussion on trust did not vary between the two genders, the positive effects of sharing and news consumption were stronger among the female youth. This suggests that female youth gain more trust in political institutions through consuming and sharing political content on social media.

Table 14. Moderation Analysis – Gender

Path	β	SD	t	p	Hypothesis

SMUPLTDSC → TRSTPOLINST	0.248	0.076	3.280	0.001	—
SMUPLTPRTC → TRSTPOLINST	0.103	0.071	1.450	0.147	—
SMUPOLNEWS → TRSTPOLINST	0.048	0.067	0.723	0.470	—
TRSTPOLINST → OFFLINPOLPART	0.548	0.037	14.852	<0.001	—
TRSTPOLINST → ONLINPOLPART	0.440	0.043	10.143	<0.001	—
Gender → TRSTPOLINST	0.051	0.078	0.658	0.511	—
Gender × SMUPLTDSC → TRSTPOLINST	0.026	0.092	0.278	0.781	H15 Not Supported
Gender × SMUPOLNEWS → TRSTPOLINST	0.229	0.091	2.522	0.012	H16 Supported
Gender × SMUPLTPRTC → TRSTPOLINST	0.201	0.094	2.143	0.032	H17 Supported

There was an influence of age, a demographic factor in the model. Political discussions and new consumption had a stronger positive effect of trust among older youth (26-30 years) than among younger respondents. The effects of political sharing on trust did not vary across the groups.

Table 15. Moderation Analysis – Age

Path	β	SD	t	p	Hypothesis
SMUPLTDSC → TRSTPOLINST	0.246	0.042	5.855	<0.001	—
SMUPLTPRTC → TRSTPOLINST	0.257	0.046	5.632	<0.001	—
SMUPOLNEWS → TRSTPOLINST	0.221	0.046	4.756	<0.001	—
TRSTPOLINST → OFFLINPOLPART	0.548	0.037	14.851	<0.001	—
TRSTPOLINST → ONLINPOLPART	0.440	0.043	10.144	<0.001	—
Age → TRSTPOLINST	-0.039	0.036	1.092	0.275	—
Age × SMUPLTPRTC → TRSTPOLINST	0.023	0.048	0.474	0.635	H18 Not Supported
Age × SMUPOLNEWS → TRSTPOLINST	0.176	0.044	3.978	<0.001	H19 Supported
Age × SMUPLTDSC → TRSTPOLINST	0.107	0.040	2.671	0.008	H20 Supported

Education influenced only one relationship in the model. Youth with higher education gained more trust in political institutions from consuming political news on social media. However education did not have any influence in affecting the relationship between political discussion and political sharing on political trust.

Table 16. Moderation Analysis – Education

Path	β	SD	t	p	Hypothesis
Education × SMUPLTPRTC → TRSTPOLINST	0.053	0.045	1.186	0.236	H21 Not Supported
Education × SMUPOLNEWS → TRSTPOLINST	0.158	0.044	3.620	<0.001	H22 Supported
Education × SMUPLTDSC → TRSTPOLINST	0.050	0.040	1.254	0.210	H23 Not Supported

5. Discussion

5.1 Theoretical Contributions

The study provides strong evidence that Political trust has positive corelation to digital engagement and civic action. The media effects around the six variables or pathways suggest that social media usage does not lead to political participation. Instead it shapes participation through citizens' trust in political institutions. This supports and extends the differential gains model (Martin, 2011) by identifying trust as an important factor through online political expression strengthens the link between news consumption and political participation. A central theoretical construct that requires contextual interpretation is that all the three social media engagement dimensions significantly and positively predict trust in political institutions (

First, the Indian government's digital governance ecosystem differs greatly from western ecosystem through which trust erosion research has been conducted. Even though the western nations have achieved more than 90% internet penetration, the government does not play a major role in the digital ecosystem. India has touched 70% penetration and is a mobile first internet user. The government through a slew of measures has embedded itself in providing information, facilitate financial transactions. For example MyGov.in is the governments citizen engagement platform and has tens of millions of registered users. The Election Commission of India (ECI) has an active social media presence which is used to inform register voters and share information to combat digital misinformation. There are governmental schemes PM-KISAN, CoWIN, and DigiLocker which are heavily promoted through the social media apps .For the young digitally active citizens of Bengaluru, exposure to political content is not only about cynicism, opposition exposure but also governments apps and measured to build institutional confidence (Jain & Singh, 2021).

Second the composition of the sample must be considered in interpreting this finding. The sample is drawn from young educated, English speaking, urbane citizens in which 73% hold bachelors or Masters degree. This demographic is more likely to use social media for information seeking than to fell prey to misinformation campaigns. They are also well equipped to critical media literacy skills that can act as a buffer against trust eroding content. Starke et al. (2021)found that the impact of social media on political trust depends on the user's characteristics, lived experience and motivations. Since this sample is highly educated and digitally active social media would be more likely to ensure confidence in political institutions.

Third is the relevance of the of the Indian political context at the time of data collection (Jan-Mar, 2024). It was the lead up to the Lok Sabha polls which was characterised by high decibel and high visibility communication by the electoral bodies, the government, parties that were vying to form the government using social media. This lead to increased civic mobilisation efforts by civic society organisations. Research on rally effects in political trust suggests that high salience political events can temporarily elevate confidence in political institutions. Particularly among younger cohorts and first time voters who are newly engaging with the political system (Norris, 2011). The timing of this data collection was around the time that political trust on institutions was temporarily heightened.

These factors taken together suggest that positive social media - trust relationship was seen among the youth of Bengaluru which reflects an environment, socio – political and digital media which vastly differs from the environment in the west where the effects of trust erosion have been documented. This is not a vilification of global findings but a contextual counterpoint which highlights the importance of studying the dynamics of political trust in different national settings.

The difference between the two participation types (Online and Offline) are also important. The model explained the variance between the participation type where the offline participation was 36.6% and online participation was 22.6%. This suggests that online engagement is influenced by other factors which the study has not taken into consideration such as digital literacy, platform features, peer networks and algorithmic recommendations. Future studies should study these factors in detail.

The effect of moderating factors seem to be theoretically meaningful. There was an amplification in trust enhancing effects of news consumption and sharing but not political discussions over social media among genders.

This means that young women find it difficult to participate in politics publicly as they worry about family expectations criticism and safety. Hence they prefer online activities since it is private and has less direct exposure such as consuming and sharing political content over social media. These digital activities help them stay politically engaged without facing any risks or pressures associated with public participation (Banaji & Bhat, 2019; Mahapatra & Arokiasamy, 2022). This also explains the stronger trust building in this group. This also explains why political discussion did not have a significant among this gender in the study.

Age strengthens the effects of political consumption and political discussion. There was no effect on political sharing. Older youth have more lived and political experience which makes them trust political institutions. Education on the other hand did not significantly change the effects of sharing or discussing political content, it affected how news consumption influenced political trust. Specifically, those with higher levels of education exhibited a more critical evaluation of news, judge credibility of information sources and can distinguish between news and misinformation. Because of this, political may have a stronger impact on building political trust among educated individuals. This is how education was able to moderate the news consumption – trust relationship. Sharing and discussion are more a result of communication norms and social network dynamics than by education. The study suggested that this is the reason education did not moderate political news sharing and political news discussion. This finding cautions that education is not equally important in all online political activities since the news information and evaluation skills does not translate to sharing political content or discussing it. Therefore the benefits are more seen in the new consumption context which is a cognitive trait.

Finally the positive corelation between online and offline political participation (r=0.436) challenges critiques of " Slacktivism" which is low effort form of social activism (especially seen in online forms). Physical and digital participation seem complementary than a substitute. This is inline with "reinforcement" hypothesis in political communication research.

5.2 Comparison with Prior Research

The findings are consistent with Zúñiga et al. (2021) who documented a positive association between social media engagement and civic participation and with Boxell et al. (2021) showing a small to moderate effect size. The mediation findings align with Warren et al. (2021) but is in contrast with the trust eroding findings of Cerón (2021). This means that the direction of social media effect on trust is context and geography dependent. The gender related findings support existing research on women engage in politics. The age related findings support existing research on how people's view and participation change as they age. A novel contribution of this study is the relationship between news consumption and political trust which is influenced by education.

5.3 Practical Implications

For the Election Commission of India (ECI), the findings are particularly useful. With the study confirming that political trust is a robust predictor of offline (β=0.548) and online (β=0.440) political participation improving on efforts at trust building becomes an important agenda. The EC's social media cell which monitors and counters electoral misinformation, should be expanded to include proactive campaigns aimed at trust building through social media platforms in urban and semi urban areas. ECI's Systematic Voter Education and Electoral Participation (SVEEP) should share verified content including infographic, short videos and FAQ's in English, Kannada, Tamil, Telugu and Urdu, the aft spoken languages in Bengaluru. This would not only help the voters but also civic activists who can help move it in numbers.

For political parties and candidates contesting elections the demographic moderation strategy suggests that they look at a differentiated strategy for men and women. Female youth strongly respond to consuming and sharing content which leads to political trust, parties and candidates should resort to producing content that are shareable. They should produce credible policy content in formats that are accessible to young women who are navigating semi private spaces in the digital world. Older youth (26-30 years) benefit more from discussion forums that are substantiative, parties should create verified online discussion groups that communicate policy stance and go beyond memes and slogans. Given the linguistic diversity of Bengaluru, parties should create content in all major languages spoken in Bengaluru.

For civic educators and non-governmental organisations working with youth in Bengaluru and similar urban centres, the finding shows that "news-finds-me" perception where the youth believe that important political news will finds its audience and they do not have to try too hard to gather news. Such youth are passive in seeking out important political news. Media literacy programmes are needed to help youth develop active news seeking habits, verify sources and critically verify political information. Such programmes should be a part of collegiate education and also streamed through popular social media platforms making it more effective rather than rely on in-person format where the most vulnerable to these mis information would be missed.

For platform designers and technology policy regulators, the findings suggest that media platforms can play a small and meaningful role in building and developing political trust. Features that promote discussion and information verifications such as WhatsApp's group polls and X's community notes encourage users to think more carefully and verify the authenticity of information.

Based on this policy makers could encourage platforms to make verified government and civic society accounts more visible during elections. This would improve systems of mis information reporting and loop these systems to the ECI's existing voter support services making it easier for citizens to identify and report false information.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research

The study has some important limitations. First it uses cross sectional design, meaning all the data collected for this study were collected at one point in time. Because of this the study is able to identify relationship between variables but cannot clearly determine whether one variable actually causes the other.

Second, this study cannot be generalised to rural areas or even to other cities which have different political cultures and political ideologies. Future research should replicate this study in semi urban, rural areas and other cities.

Third, the survey was administered exclusively in English. This decision while pragmatically justifying English as the lingua franca of Bengaluru's educated urban class induces a selection bias. The sample is skewed towards Post-Graduates (23.1%) and graduates (49.9%) which reflects the Educated Bengaluru youth and excludes youth who speak other languages who are bigger in number and may have different social media usage patterns. Future studies should include administering the same questionnaire in other languages to enable comparison with other linguistic groups.

Fourth the study relies on self-reported data which may not be completely accurate. Participants may give socially desirable answers or may not accurately recall past behaviours, especially in voting behaviour.

Future studies could be made more accurate by comparing survey responses with digital data (actual online activity) to check if self-reported behaviour matches real world actions.

Fifth, the study was platform agnostic, each of these platform have different user behaviour, algorithmic logic and user demographics, platform specific effects should be undertaken in future studies.

Sixth, the quality of the content the participants were exposed to was not measured. Trust measures are likely to vary between high quality political journalism and partisan or fabricated content.

Seventh, political knowledge and political efficacy were not assessed. They could be good mediators or moderators.

Finally EFA and CFA were measured on the same sample, a methodological constraint dismissed in section 3.5, an independent verification with a new or split sample is recommended.

6. Conclusion

This study shows that among Indian youth in Bengaluru, using social media for political discussions, sharing political content and consuming political news increases their trust in political discussions. Greater trust then

encourages youth to participate more in online and offline political activities. Political trust acts an important link between social media engagement and political participation. While social media directly influences political participation, it also influences participation indirectly by increasing peoples trust in political institutions.

These relations differ among different demographic groups. Gender strengthens the impact of news consumption and content sharing on political trust. Age increases the influence of political discussion and political news consumption. Education only affects the relation between news consumption and trust. Therefore efforts to increase political participation among youth need to be tailored for these demographic factors separately.

Despite well documented concerns about "echo chambers", polarisation and mis information, the effect of social media engagement on political trust and political participation among Indian youth appears to be positive.

Young people who actively engage with political content on social media seem to develop greater trust in political institutions and participate more in civic activities. This suggests that social media can support democracy when used to consume, share and discuss political content.

Future research should develop longitudinal designs, look at social media through each of the platform separately and expand to different geographies.

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